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CH'AN NEWS LETTER

Life in a Ch'an Monastery

Lecture by Master Sheng-yen at the University of Toronto on October 18, 1991

Today I will speak about practice in a traditional Ch'an monastery, and I will tell you something of my own early experiences practicing in such a monastery.

There really are no authentic Ch'an monasteries in America. You can't visit one here. To find an authentic monastery you must go back to the China of the past.

In ancient Chinese monasteries a practitioner's time was divided between meditation, attending dharma talks, and daily work. Morning and evening was spent in meditation. Daytime was for working.

We are somewhat ignorant of the daily schedule in early Ch'an monasteries before Master Pai-chang (720-814). But from the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) onward, we know that there was chanting and reading of the sutras as well as meditation in the morning. Likewise, in the evening there would be some chanting or reading before meditation.

In the *Platform Sutra* the Sixth Patriarch does not put a lot of emphasis on sitting, rather he emphasizes practice in daily life. His disciple, Huai-jan (677-744), continued this tradition. But the Fourth and the Fifth Patriarchs, as well as Master Pai-chang in his Pure Rules, specifically mention sitting as an important method of practice. Thus sitting meditation became one of the major methods of practice in the Ch'an tradition.

Again, in the Pure Rules of Master Pai-chang there is no mention of a Buddha hall for performing prostrations, but a Dharma hall for listening to lectures is detailed. At that time chanting sutras and performing prostrations were considered less important than listening to the Dharma.

From records and stories we know that Huang-po (d. 850), a disciple of Pai-chang, taught prostration. There is, for example, a kung-an of an emperor in the T'ang Dynasty (618-906) who, before he became emperor, spent some time as a novice monk at Huang-po's Ch'an monastery. His curiosity about prostration when he encountered the master performing this practice is duly recorded.

Once we reach the Sung Dynasty, there seem to have been both Buddha halls and Dharma halls. The Buddha hall was used for chanting sutras and liturgies

No. 92 May, 1992

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both in the morning and in the evening. Were Dharma talks given regularly? That does not seem to be the case. Within any given month, Dharma talks were scheduled rather infrequently. We don't know which days were specifically designated for them.

There was also an important practice called Universal Invitation. This was a time when everyone was invited to do work at the monasteries. This was sometimes called *ch'u-p'o*, literally "going to the mountains," but it did not necessarily entail field work. It might include various chores around the monastery. Under certain circumstance, attendance at Dharma talks might be excused. Universal Invitation was mandatory for monks and nuns.

Hua-tou's and kung-an's became the principal means of practice in the Sung Dynasty. However, in the Yuan Dynasty (1264-1368) many practitioners adopted the method of reciting Buddha's name. Since Ch'an was transmitted to Japan mainly during the Sung period, this method was not adopted by the Japanese. Often people do not realize the influence of Chinese Ch'an on the development of Japanese Zen.

For example, Master Dogen's "The Rules of Zazen" is really taken from a work by a Sung Dynasty Ch'an master, Tsung-tse, with only a few words changed here and there. Master Dogen never explicitly said that this was his own work, but many people take it as such.

Fortunately, much of the Sung tradition can be seen in modern Japanese temples, both Rinzai and Soto, especially Myoshin-ji and Eihei-ji. Temples such as these no longer exist in China.

Establishing a monastery was never easy. Land and buildings had to be donated by wealthy individuals or officials or the government itself. Typically, the monastery grounds would include a field cultivated by the monks. Some temples had fields quite far off which were donated by people who attended the temple but who lived at some distance from it. These

fields were often leased because there were not enough monks to work them.

Working the land was simple in the early monasteries. Later on, with the increase of donated land, leasing became common, and some monks took on bureaucratic functions and had to work in the temple office or see to the management of the land.

When I left home, the monastery in which I was a disciple owned much land, so I first learned to work in the fields, those near the monastery and also those in the mountains.

Since most of us who left home were quite young, we had to learn traditional household tasks such as those learned by a young housewife. I had to make, mend, and wash my own clothes. I had to learn to plant rice and vegetables, and I had to learn how to cook them. This is the way life is to this day in my own temple in Taiwan, which is called Nung Ch'an Ssu. "Nung" stands for agriculture. Thus it is a place where farming and Ch'an are practiced together.

When a novice first enters my temple, he or she is first sent to the kitchen to learn to cook. We also ask a professional tailor to come and teach people how to sew. But most of my disciples know only how to mend; few can really make clothes. They don't really have the patience. However, everyone must learn how to shave his own head. Now we have razors. In the past we only had knives and we left lots of scars on our heads.

When I first left home, I was given no formal introduction to meditation or the practice of Ch'an. When I asked my master if he would teach me how to practice, he would say, "Aren't you already practicing? Isn't eating practice? Isn't sleeping practice, working practice, walking practice?"

Once you leave home, you come to see that everything you do is practice.

Most people who begin practice have the idea that there is a specific mode of cultivation, a specific form, a specific method. Most people usually see a physical and a mental aspect to the practice, a need to train the body as well as the mind. But when I was a young monk, there was no such idea. People saw living as practice. They did not delve into the deep philosophy of the teaching.

When I was first at the temple, we simply practiced. We worked and prostrated. Every day we chanted and read sutras. We were not told their meaning. It didn't matter. We simply went through the process. We cut down on our attachment to the things around us, cut down on the things in our heads, cut down on our discriminations. This was a good method for us. However, for modern lay people such training would be inadequate.

Many of my disciples have questioned these methods. With no emphasis on what they think practice is — meditation, prostrations, chanting — they feel that life in the monastery is not particularly different from their lives at home. What's the point, they say. At home we work, here we work. At home we cook, and we cook here, too. Why did we bother to leave home? Where is the practice?

What would you say to such disciples? Is life at home and life at the monastery the same? Someone just mentioned attitude, and that is entirely correct. The way we approach what we do at the monastery is not quite the same as the way most lay people approach what they have to do.

We practice not for personal gain, but simply as a way of life. Once a practitioner has trained himself to the point where the mind is very stable and few discriminations arise, it is very important that he rely on the principles and concepts of Buddhadharma as his guide. Otherwise, practitioners might develop a nihilistic attitude and conclude that there is nothing in life worth doing. This is a mistake and very much misses the point of what practice is about.

Relying on the principles and concepts of Buddhadharma, a practitioner will live his life in such a way that he is selfless yet very much involved in the goings-on of the world. Such a person has a genuine concern for all living beings, and works in a diligent manner for the benefit of others.

You may recall the story in the *Platform Sutra* when the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng (638-713), met with the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen (602-675). Hui-neng was sent to the kitchen to grind rice, and it was not until at least six months later that Hung-jen finally explained the *Diamond Sutra* to him.

Guided by the same principles, I continue to send novice monks to work in the fields or in the kitchen when they first leave home. At first there really is no opportunity to listen to Dharma talks. Many complain. Usually I tell them that if they want to learn, they must do what the Sixth Patriarch did — work in the fields and in the kitchen. To simply begin by listening to Dharma talks will make enlightenment that much more difficult to attain. Life in a Ch'an monastery brings the body and mind into a gentle and harmonious state. In this way you become receptive to the teachings of the Buddhadharma. Then you can genuinely practice Ch'an Dharma.

It has been a slow process establishing a good foundation for Buddhadharma in Taiwan. Buddhism there did not have the kind of historical base that it had on the mainland. It is only in the last forty years that we've had real progress. We still have much to do.

However, we are working very hard to build a new monastic environment in Taiwan. We have close to 100 acres where we will build a complex inspired by the discipline and the way of life of the great monasteries of the T'ang Dynasty.

Of course I have benefited greatly from the time I spent in Ch'an monasteries, but this was not my exclusive practice. It is because I have continued to work diligently on my own that I have reached my

present attainment. In fact, two recent Ch'an masters, Hsu-yun (1840-1959) and Lai-kuo (1881-1953), both attained enlightenment outside of the monastery, even though they had practiced in the confines of Ch'an temples for many years.

This in itself would provide enough material for a Dharma talk. Let me stop here and take some questions about what I have said today.

Question: What do you mean by an authentic, genuine Ch'an monastery?

Shih-fu: By this I mean a place where people live a monastic life in the Ch'an tradition throughout the year. In many of the famous monasteries in China today, monks do nothing more than sweep the floor and sell tickets to tourists. In Taiwan there are three or four places that have arrangements for people to spend time and practice, but for a limited time only. Practice does not continue throughout the year. People usually go for five days or seven days, after which a new group arrives.

The Ch'an Center in New York is similar. We have morning and evening services and sitting, so it looks something like a Ch'an monastery, but we have only four week-long retreats throughout the whole year. In traditional Chinese monasteries there are long summer and winter retreats which last either 49 or 120 days. At the present time there are very few temples in China or Taiwan that provide such extended opportunities to practice.

Question: I have two questions. First, what method do you teach your students, kung-an or reciting Buddha's name? And second, what do you think of the prospects for the flourishing of Buddhadharma in the West?

Shih-fu: First, I do not use one particular method. To some I give a kung-an, to others a hua-tou. Some beginners simply use the counting-breath method.

I rarely recommend the method of reciting Buddha's name, but there are some people who have begun with this and are resistant to other methods. To such people I teach a method whereby they recite Buddha's name and follow it by counting a number. It is quite similar to the counting-breath method. When reciting Buddha's name leads them to the point where there are few wandering thoughts and their minds are very clear, I have them ask this question: "Who is reciting Buddha's name?" This is asked continuously without interruption. That is really the hua-tou method.

Second, I see the Ch'an practice that has evolved in the West as a stable, continuing process. It is not a fad about to fade away. The practice of Ch'an does not seek what is exotic or exciting. Rather it follows a rational, reasonable and useful way of life. I have been traveling to the United States for about fifteen years. I have not really had that many students compared to the number I have in Taiwan. But those that I do have, even those who have participated in only a few retreats, are strong in the practice. Even if they don't come for a retreat for ten years, they still remember the benefit they first received.

Question: Do the attitudes of the western and oriental students differ? Do you have a different relationship with each group?

Shih-fu: Yes, in fact it seems that I have something of a closer relationship with my western students. The western perspective is direct, whereas oriental students are often less decisive and more prone to ambiguous thinking. Westerners are more receptive to the teaching. At the very least they are no worse than the oriental students. I'm not trying to make western students feel good. This is simply the way I see the situation.

Question: It seems to me that the Ch'an approach really celebrates personal insight. It seems very narcissistic and practitioners seem uninterested

in anyone else's benefit but their own. I notice a tendency to boast about spiritual achievement. This really seems to isolate the individual.

Shih-fu: It is correct to say that Ch'an practice is a pursuit of personal wisdom. But how can you judge what wisdom is? Within, it manifests as freedom from vexation. Without, it manifests in the way we interact with what is around us. True wisdom is without discrimination and is always at one with the environment. It is in this external manifestation that you see that the practice is not simply the pursuit of personal spiritual gratification. If you are only interested in your own freedom from vexation and your own benefit, then you are not practicing Ch'an. If you practice only for yourself, you may achieve some level of samadhi, a very concentrated mental state, but genuine Ch'an is always turned outward as well as inward.

Question: Then Ch'an seeks to change the world by changing the individual?

Shih-fu: Yes, Ch'an begins at the logical point of changing yourself. Once your mental state has calmed and changed, there is a natural tendency to help others. This will effect change in the world around us.

Question: Ch'an practice seems quite different from that of Pure Land, but Ch'an practitioners still chant Amitabha Buddha's name. Why is this?

Shih-fu: First, there is a historical reason. Toward the end of the T'ang Dynasty, Pure Land practice was very popular. A Ch'an master by the name of Yung-ming (904-975) was a master of the Fa-yen school, but he was also a great proponent of Pure Land practice. His influence was so great that after his time there were few monks who did not recite Buddha's name.

It is also important to note that there is no intrinsic antagonism between the recitation of

Buddha's name and Ch'an practice. For example, in the *Sutra of Immeasurable Light* (Sukhavativyuha Sutra), many methods of contemplating the Buddha are described, including that of reciting his name. Recitation of the Buddha's name may be considered Pure Land practice, but as it is described in the sutra there is no emphasis on seeking rebirth in the Pure Land. Likewise, in the *Amitabha Sutra*, one passage describes reciting the Buddha's name with a single-pointed mind. This can be a method of practicing samadhi. Likewise, the *Sutra of Manjusri Inquiring on Prajna*, speaks of reciting the Buddha's name and similar methods. In fact, in that sutra, the name of any Buddha will do. It doesn't have to be Amitabha's. Even though all of these methods involve the recitation of Buddha's name, they do not imply an aspiration to be reborn in the Pure Land. Thus a Ch'an practitioner and a Pure Land practitioner may both recite the Buddha's name, but they do so with different attitudes.

Question: I am curious about what you said about the difference between left-home and lay practice. You said that monks practice purposelessly. They just practice. But how can that be possible for lay people who must continually set and achieve goals in their daily lives?

Shih-fu: In the beginning of the process there is always a purpose whether you are a householder or a monk. You are always seeking something. Eventually one can go from seeking something to not seeking something. It is also possible that a person may be seeking something, yet not be seeking it. In other words, what is purposeful and what is purposeless can coexist. A genuine practitioner knows very well that the result of practice is non-attainment, but to be truly in a state of non-seeking, he must reach at least the Eighth Bhumi on the Bodhisattva path, which is a very high level of attainment. Even when a person reaches the First Bhumi, his vow to deliver sentient beings is still in force, which is to

say that there is still a sense of seeking something.

Question: Is there any program in your temple in Taiwan that does work for the community and the environment? Do you plan to build another large monastery like the one in Taiwan here in America?

Shih-fu: As to the first question: This is the Year of Environmental Protection in Taiwan. Before I left Taiwan ten days ago, I appeared on TV with the head of the Environmental Protection Administration to discuss the Buddhist perspective on protecting the environment. In fact, my temple

has been working to improve the environment for the last three years by advocating and practicing recycling of products and conservation of resources.

For the second question, I can tell you that the new complex in Taiwan demands so much of my time that it is pointless for me to think about anything like it in America. But if the causes and conditions in the future seem to be ripe, we may start to think about it.

Thank you very much for your questions. They were very good and helpful in explaining the Dharma.

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Shih-fu with retreat participants in Wales.



Master Sheng-yen's activities:

APRIL

- 11** Lecture at the NYU School of Law on "The Wisdom of Ch'an," at the invitation of The Chinese Student Association. Attending were students from Harvard and Columbia, as well as Buddhist monks and nuns from both the Chinese and Korean traditions. All together there were over 200 people.

Ming-ye Wang translating for Shih-fu at Columbia

- 15-24** A seven-day retreat in Wales. This is the second time that Shih-fu has conducted a retreat in Great Britain. There were 31 participants including doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, and professors.

At the conclusion of the retreat, Shih-fu went to the British Museum to see the private collection of the Tun Huang manuscripts. There Shih-fu examined many sacred and valuable scrolls and texts from early China.



MAY

- 1** Lecture at Yale University on "What Is Zen? What Can Zen Do For You?" at the invitation of Mrs. Hsu. Over 100 people attended. Shih-fu also examined the large collection of Buddhist texts in the school's library.
- 3** The annual Buddha's Birthday Celebration. There was a bathing of the Buddha ceremony which was followed by a short talk by the guest speaker, Master Jen Chun. In the afternoon Shih-fu spoke on the significance of Sakyamuni Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Afterwards members of the Center provided entertainment. Over 500 people came to our celebration. Joy and Dharma happiness abounded.
- 8-10** An academic Ch'an retreat on "Faith In Mind," a poem by the Third Patriarch, conducted at Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, NY, at the invitation of John Daido Looi Roshi. 58 people participated.
- 12** Participated in a panel discussion on Buddhism along with Ven. Piyatissa, Ven. Suhita Dharma, Lama Pema Wangdak and Dr. Gunatilake from different traditions of Buddhism at St. Paul's Chapel, Columbia University.

UP-COMING ACTIVITIES

Meditation

Seven-day Intensive Retreat under the personal guidance of Master Sheng-yen for those who have completed the Beginner's Meditation Class or had previous meditation experience. (Both the Memorial Day Retreat and the Independence Day Retreat are filled.) \$100 members, \$200 non-members.

One-Day Retreat: June 13 from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. \$10 members, \$15 non-members

One-Day Beginner's Meditation Class: Basic principles of meditation including methods of sitting, breathing, walking, sleeping, standing, yoga exercises and massage. Saturday June 20 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. \$50

Group Meditation: Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. Free of Charge.



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